

Introducing Tony Hall's cunning plan: The BB(&A)C

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[Brian Winston](#) [1] 31 March 2014

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Tony Hall's scheme for the BBC's future has been widely disdained as a willful desire to put the clock back to the days of 'Auntie' BBC, but Brian Winston argues it is more like a return to the brilliant deal that acquired the Proms in the '20s.

It would be an error to read Director General Tony Hall's 'grand design' for the BBC -- the treaties with the country's elite arts institutions -- as a sterile failure of vision, a flaccid desire to return to the broadcasting verities of the schedule of half a century ago.

Certainly, the programme highlighted in Hall's plans as exemplifying where he is taking the BBC, *Civilisation: A Personal View*, speaks to the qualities that caused the BBC of that time to be thought of as 'Auntie'. It was exquisitely produced, languid, unenlightening, unchallenging and dripping class privilege by reinforcing its dictatorial taste-making propensities. At the time some (well, the present writer) thought it a desperately uninteresting 'impersonal' view, hopelessly irrelevant to the then-and-now. In fact, produced in 1969, as much as anything, it signaled a Thermidor in the revolution led by Hugh Carlton-Greene, Hall's 1960s predecessor, which had, perhaps for the first time, tackled and overturned the Corporation's historic problem with the popular. It symbolised a restatement of the BBC's core value as a protector of that limited vision of culture produced, as we had been taught by Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams, by the haut-bourgeoisie in Paris and London between 1780 and 1820 (well, more or less). This is what had been under attack from Carlton-Greene throughout his tenure in the 1960s. He had unleashed the dogs of satire, for example, and the grittinesses of *Z-Cars* but *Civilisation* revealed the cage was still actually in place. One saw (as *Civilisation's* presenter Sir Kenneth Clark would say) in his impersonal account exactly what one knew to be one's culture and the BBC's role in glorifying it.

But Hall's prodding of this ghost is far from dismissible as the actions of man who cannot see beyond his own opera-house. It is, in fact, brilliant as it contains the seeds of the BBC's second century. Times are hard and likely to continue so. Biblical injunctions about not living by bread alone loose what little force they have when the government declares that, overall, bread is in short supply. In the face of this, augmented by the ingrained philistinism of one's old Etonian leaders, there is clear logic in positioning the BBC overtly as the spider in the centre of the country's arts infrastructure. The template is not Sir Kenneth Clark's efforts, it's Sir Henry Wood's.

Even as the BBC was coming into existence (as a corporation, not a company) in 1927, John Reith, the first director general rescued the Promenade Concerts that had been a feature of London's musical life since 1895. How that came about perfectly illustrates why Tony Hall's deals with the National Theatre, the Tate, the Hay Festival, the Royal Academy and Glyndebourne represent not merely a good idea, but the only way to go.

Starting in February 1895, the Proms were a commercial venture, the brain-child of an impresario,

Robert Newman, to fill the new Queen's Hall. He had, of course, a high-minded purpose. As he explained to the musician, Henry Wood: 'I am going to run nightly concerts to train the public in easy stages. Popular at first, gradually raising the standard until I have created a public for classical and modern music'. From the off, though, 'popular' equalled one night of Wagner and one of Beethoven. 'Modern music', aka "Novelties" were then contemporary works by Ravel, Vaughan-Williams, etc. Wood became the hall's resident symphony orchestra's permanent conductor; but Newman and the Proms did not prosper. In 1915, the hall, the band and the brand were taken over the music publishers Chappel. Obviously, they sought to benefit from show-casing the scores they were ready to sell. Still the market did not quite work and by the mid-1920s the Proms were again in financial trouble. Chappel were threatening to withdraw support when Reith stepped in. The series continued in the hall and on the radio under Sir Henry's baton. By 1930, the concerts had removed to the Albert Hall and it was the BBC Symphony Orchestra which gave them. In effect, Reith had used the hypothecated tax that is the license fee to rescue a valued cultural institution from the market.

And is not this a jolly good plan to protect and sustain any and all the institutional bearers of our 'civilisation' 90 years on?

When Tony Hall laid out his stall last Autumn there was much about the wonders of the refined i-Player – an entertainment platform so advanced it seemed it would even find your socks and make you tea. But the programming he had in mind for it, Shakespeare and opera, in essence and by contrast, were not just predictable but curiously out-dated. As the ex-head of Covent Garden, though, his vision of content was scarce surprising. Here was no Carlton-Greene determined to protect the Corporation from the limitations of its own comfort zone. Nor was this a managerialist Birt saving the BBC via the tired and inappropriate nostrums of a business school. Instead, Hall presented himself as a technician seized with a white-hot vision of a brave new BBC world. And this iThingy would deliver as never before.... Shakespeare and opera.

But now all this starts to make sense. Hall seems to be mounting a strategic withdrawal of the BBC from the terrain of the popular where it has only flickeringly prospered. We are here being returned not to the '60s but the '30s when the pesky need to please the commoners was contained by the rhetoric of educating the masses. Obviously, the old danger persists: a failure to deliver significant ratings strengthens the hand of all who would do the BBC down. But perhaps the long term view ought to acknowledge the logic of the license cannot be sustained among the multiple platforms of the digital age for ever. If the tabloid press cannot hold the attention of its readership (and, palpably, it can't) maybe the BBC should give up trying to be 'popular' (or, better, populist), too. Perhaps the safest route is to turn the BBC into the BB&AC – the British Broadcasting and Arts Corporation, the organisation through which the unwilling 21st state is persuaded to support, one way or another, the 'culture' of the middle classes. However funded, it would be the gate-keeper, subventing, supporting and distributing largess across the entire sector.

After all, the Proms are alive and well and I might have been bored silly by Sir Kenneth but millions loved it.

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 About the author

Brian Winston is the editor of OurBeeb and lincoln chair at the university of Lincoln. He is the author of numerous books on the media, has run media studies departments at universities in the UK and the USA, and, in 1985, won an Emmy award.



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